Critical Education

Infinite Jurisdiction: Managing Student Achievement In and Out of School

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Abstract

This article applies the framework of international development to the experiences of corps members teaching in urban schools in an attempt to theorize how corps members respond to the extraordinary pressure placed on them to improve student achievement. Further, by closely examining the narratives corps members employ to describe students, families and communities, this chapter raises questions about how far the jurisdiction of the school should extend and suggests that efforts to regulate students' home lives are analogous to colonialism's aims to manage, contain and control the futures of its subjects.

Like disasters abroad, which periodically capture the world's attention (Polman, 2011), urban schooling has become the cause célèbre of philanthropists in the United States. Arne Duncan has referred to education reform as "the civil rights issue of our generation" (Dillon, 2009). The remedies favored for addressing school failure, however, have little to do with the deep, reflective and locally-driven approach that characterized the Civil Rights Movement, emphasizing instead the de-professionalization of teachers, the persistent depiction of students and families as deficient and an over-reliance on top-down mechanisms to improve teaching and learning.

At the center of discussions about school reform is Teach For America (TFA), whose corps members make personal and professional sacrifices to commit two years of their lives to teaching in impoverished urban and rural settings across America. Like international humanitarian workers, TFA corps members are driven by a dual sense of optimism and ambition, eager to remedy societal inequities and willing to relocate to unfamiliar geographic settings in order to do so. With little formal background in education and scant preparation, corps members begin to embody the tension they encounter as they try to "do good work" and improve the life chances of their students in the face of significant adversity. Like aid workers, they spend a significant portion of their first year in the classroom straddling a "discourse of possibility" (Macedo, 1994) and a "discourse of deficit" (Flores, et al., 1991) as they attempt to reconcile their hopes and desires for their students with institutional mandates and constraints.

This article, then, aims to explore the resonances between the field of urban education and international humanitarianism, particularly what it means for corps members to try to "help" their students and how this desire, however laudatory, can compromise their relationships with students and families, their willingness to remain in urban classrooms, and their own feelings of efficacy. Moreover, the corps members I taught seemed to struggle with many of the same broad questions faced by humanitarian workers including: How do I come to understand the students I am trying to help? What future do I, as a "helper", imagine for those I am helping and what actions do I take to achieve these outcomes? And lastly, what does it mean to leave "the field" and how is the decision to leave justified when the work is clearly unfinished and ongoing?

Ridgeville School District Context

This article traces the experiences of one cohort of 43 TFA corps members[1] teaching in Ridgeville[2], a post-industrial, Northeastern city with a population of approximately 1.5 million people during the 2010–2011 school year at a time when the Ridgeville School District faced intense pressure to reform. As a result, scripted reading and math programs were adopted district-wide, and the role of charter schools took on increased significance as an unprecedented number of public schools were taken over by local and national charter corporations. One of the largest charter networks in the city is the Excel Charter Network, which manages an increasing number of middle schools and high schools within Ridgeville under the motto "Excellence: No excuses." By

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[1] Of the first-year corps members included, there were 27 White teachers 3 of whom were male, 10 African-American teachers, all of whom were female, 2 Latina teachers and 1 Asian male. I also included three second-year corps members in the study. Of these, one was a Caucasian female and two were Latino men.

[2] All names are pseudonyms

drawing upon data[3] generated during two required methods courses I taught for corps members at the elite university where they were receiving certification, I show that the experiences of TFA corps members are analogous in many ways to those of international humanitarian workers as they wrestle with what it means to work across lines of race, culture and class to achieve educational equity.

Like humanitarian workers who must negotiate various bureaucracies to fulfill their mandate to provide assistance to impoverished populations, corps members had to contend with similar complexities in their effort to address the longstanding "achievement gap" between white and minority students. Just as international NGOs predicate their recruitment on the desire of young people to do meaningful work in the world, TFA seeks corps members who are willing to work "relentlessly" to close the achievement gap. This relentless commitment to improving student performance often manifests as an issue of control. As this article illustrates, corps members inhabit institutional spaces that promote "inifinite jurisdiction," aiming to explicitly manage the lives of students, families and even communities in the name of academic achievement.

According to their website, Teach For America's mission is "to grow the movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education" (www.teachforamerica.org). In order to accomplish this, TFA "enlists committed individuals, invests in leaders and accelerates impact." Teach For America frames corps members' initial two-year commitment as the beginning of a longer career that might lead into other sectors but will be characterized by an ongoing commitment to working for educational equity, no matter the ultimate sector of employment. There is no shortage of recent college graduates willing to take on this work. In fact, despite mixed results on quantitative measures aiming to assess the effectiveness of its teachers (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006), TFA continues to garner nationwide attention, attracting an increasingly competitive pool of applicants from the nation's most elite colleges. TFA has become the nation's largest provider of teachers to low-income communities and the network of alumni and corps members is over 17,000 strong, and growing. Moreover, between 2000 and 2008, Teach For America received more than 213 million dollars in grant money, far more than any other single organization (Fairbanks, 2011). Although the reach and prestige of the program has continued to expand, little scholarly attention has been paid to the experience of the corps members themselves, who, despite their varied accomplishments, contend daily with a number of significant challenges. Not only are these teachers placed in geographic areas unfamiliar to them, they lack formal training in education, having completed only a five-week summer training institute. Most importantly, perhaps, TFA corps members are expected to meet the academic needs of a diverse student body, negotiate a number of strict curricular mandates and, in most cases, mediate a range of cultural, racial and socioeconomic differences between them and their students.

Narratives of Students and Families

Many corps members entered Ridgeville with specific notions regarding who they were trying to "help." The ways in which corps members both thought about and portrayed their

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[3] Data sources included class discussions, course assignments, interviews and focus groups, and classroom observations

students had significant implications for how they taught them. Parallels with the field of humanitarian assistance further illustrate how efforts to assist others can be undermined by attempts to control the outcome- an important reminder that "helpers" in any sector of society must constantly reflect upon their motivations and intentions in order to resist colonialist tendencies.

Like international aid work in which "the role for local people- those seen as 'victims'- to manage any aspect of this aid system is minimal or nonexistent," urban students and families are often rendered silent by the systems designed to support them. According to Anderson (1998), international aid focuses almost entirely on the "concentration of delivery of things to these people, rather than on problem-solving with them and thus places the beneficiaries of aid in a passive, accepting role" (p. 140). This phenomenon can be understood, at least in part, by the ways in which teachers discursively construct their students. These depictions were most prominent in the classroom vignettes which corps members composed and shared publicly as a course assignment at the beginning of the semester. Although the parameters of the assignment were intentionally vague- they were asked only to describe a critical incident from their teaching- most chose to write about their shock at discovering students' academic deficits. Siena described how one of her early literacy lessons failed when she inadvertently embarrassed a fourth-grade student who had not learned to read:

> Now I am standing over his desk with the teacher look I have learned to own. I address the rest of the students, telling them to put their hands down because Thomas is going to read. I bend down point to where he should be and when he looks up from *Shiloh* his face is red and tears are streaming from his face. At that moment, I realize that Thomas hasn't learned how to read, and that while I thought I was teaching him a lesson on paying attention, he felt embarrassed and attacked.

Dawn, in a separate vignette, outlined a similar account:

> Once I conferred with Kyear, I noticed Curtis who had a book open, but whose eyes couldn't have been further away from the text. As I approached Curtis, I asked him questions about the book, of the same vein as those I asked Kyear. However, this time, my questions were only answered by blank stares. I decided to try a new approach and asked Curtis to read the story from the beginning aloud. Curtis began to smile and "read" a logically founded story however, none of the words were from the page in front of him. It quickly became evident that Curtis did not know how to read.

Numerous corps members used the vignette assignment as a means to contend with and theorize student underachievement. In recounting these incidents, teachers expressed their frustration quite honestly. In response to a student repeatedly seeking support, for example, Nicolas wrote, "These kids, I mutter to myself. No work ethic, no focus, no effort. I have a lot of work to do this year." Similarly, Melinda was struck by one first grader's "lackluster performance" on a sight word challenge activity, writing, "I wondered how she was able to pass so long without her teachers or parents noticing her ignorance." Another teacher lamented that working with her students on a reading activity taught her the true meaning of the word "behind."

As the course progressed and more invitations were offered to consider student achievement from a range of different perspectives, an increasing number of corps members began to reflect critically upon the ways in which their beliefs about students' capabilities would come to affect not only their teaching but their broader hopes for educational equity. For example, when

offered the opportunity to reflect on her vignette about a student's struggle to spell "basic" words, Dierdre immediately recognized and problematized her use of deficit language by writing, "Rather than phrasing this as a deficit, what are different ways I can utilize what V. already has, focusing on buttressing those skills with reading and writing fluency he needs in the classroom?" Joey, when given the opportunity to re-write his vignette, noted the narrow definition of literacy he had previously applied to his classroom. Reflecting on our class discussion he noted that, "Literacy is not simply something that you can judge to be 'there' or 'absent' in a student." These counter-narratives suggest that certain course assignments and subsequent opportunities for ongoing reflection can help corps members identify and problematize their assumptions regarding student achievement. Lastly, in discussing her assumptions about student achievement, Erica wrote,

> I, too, am guilty of identifying my students by their guided reading group name. The Blueberries are my lowest leveled readers. I often catch myself talking about how I don't know how to help the "Blueberries." Once, when talking about a student who jumped from the lowest level reading group to the middle reading group, my co-teacher said, "That's pretty good for a Blueberry!" The name "Blueberry" now connotes low readers who need extra help. Each student in that group is classified with that low-performing academic identity.

In reflecting upon her use of the term "blueberry," Erica recognized how quickly categories of achievement were translated into lasting identities (Rist, 1970). Thus, corps members' assumptions regarding their students' abilities has significant bearing on the future achievement of those students. Research has shown that if students are continually viewed by educators as low-achieving or incapable, they will begin to adopt and enact these identities making the chances of mainstream success more remote (Gitlin et al, 2003; Fordham, 1999; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009).

In her article, "Some Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Aid," Mary Anderson (1998) speaks to this problematic depiction of those one is seeking to help:

> As they [aid workers] sit around talking in the evening, conversation frequently involves stories of dangers encountered, local people outsmarted, would-be thieves caught. Tales are told of weaknesses, failures, and shortcomings of local people and local systems that have to be dealt with by the superior knowledge/intelligence/wisdom of outside agencies or personnel (p. 151).

In attempting to explain how aid workers come to resent the very people who drew them to the work in the first place, Anderson suggests that "the process of distancing as an outsider from victim insiders very often represents a way of dealing with inequality" (p. 151). The honest questions raised in many of the vignettes supports this notion, suggesting that corps members were using the assignment not only to contend with the practical challenges related to teaching but also to grapple with educational inequities writ large.

Framing Low-Achievement

The vignettes also revealed that in countless instances, students were "framed" for the corps members beforehand by both TFA and Excel Charter Network as low-achievers, perhaps influencing these initial, problematic conceptions. For example, one corps member wrote:

> Leading up to the first day of school, Teach For America and Excel people- recruiters, advisors, mentors- kept telling me that I won't fully understand how far

behind my future students are until I meet them. I took this to mean that perhaps a few students wouldn't know their letters, but that most of them would at least know basic words like dog and cat. On Friday of last week, I realized how wrong I was, and how much I underestimated what "behind" really means.

Another corps member, Wendy, was aware of the "deprivation framework" she brought to her teaching but felt as though it was reinforced not only by Teach For America but by society at large, the school she worked in, and even her students:

The differences in "received understandings" and "perceived understandings" have serious implications on the psyche of an urban teacher. I receive the ideas of deprivation from society, from the school system, and from individuals within the school- including my students.

Some of this framing occurred during the Teach For America Summer Institute, the five-week training program all corps members participate in prior to entering the urban classroom. The manual distributed to corps members to prepare them to teach literacy establishes a "discourse of crisis," by citing an array of demoralizing statistics, the most startling of which is the claim that 74% of students enter first grade "at risk" for school failure (Teach For America, 2007, p. 12). However, the document is quick to make the distinction that not all American students are at risk for school failure. Rather it is the poor, minority students who are consistently testing below basic as children and subsequently re-appearing in the prison system as illiterate teenagers(p. 12). While the TFA materials mention the need for print-rich early literacy environments to support these students, the document also asserts that students are deprived of rich literacy experiences before they even arrive in school. For example, they cite the Hart & Risley (1995) vocabulary study which asserts that poor children come to school with a deficit of nearly thirty million words, an educational starting point which does not bode well for the rest of their academic career.

Corps members further struggled to reconcile these images of students with their perceptions of their role as educators. In some instances, for example, depictions of students as "deficient" influenced how teachers conceived of their job. For example, Melinda wrote, "Overwhelmed by statistics about my students' minimal proficiencies, I felt it my job to swoop in with ideas and impart knowledge." If Melinda had anticipated bright students with a range of capacities, she may have adopted different pedagogical and philosophical stances towards her instruction. Instead she adopted what Freire (1970) referred to as the "banking model" of education in which students are positioned as passive recipients rather than co-creators of knowledge.

In addition to promoting depictions of students as academically low or deficient, TFA framed families, school administrations and veteran teachers in advance as incompetent or uncaring, leading corps members to make assumptions regarding both their own responsibilities as teachers and the urban contexts they entered. While TFA might have been aiming to prepare teachers to work in challenging and isolating settings, many teachers found the framing problematic as they entered the field with diminished expectations regarding the kinds of support they might encounter and the caliber of their colleagues.

Moreover, others felt that TFA encouraged an inflated sense of their own importance as teachers. Denis, for example, noted the following regarding his changing beliefs about the formative role of teachers in urban school contexts:

Before actually starting to teach, the assumption was that I was going to provide that

support for kids that might not otherwise have it. Now I feel like my understanding of where that support comes from is different. It can come from so many different places. The teacher might not be as formative… I think teachers are formative, but they might not be as central as it was presented when I was applying to TFA.

In explaining how he came to these new understandings, Denis mentioned conducting home visits for each of his students and, in so doing, realizing the kinds of extensive support their families provided. Denis found that the parents had hopes and dreams for their children and were working daily to support school learning:

> One of the questions that I would ask at each visit was, "What are your dreams for your child and how do you see yourself helping your child in school?" [There is a prevalent belief] that these parents can't because they are so busy and they have to make ends meet. They are very limited in their involvement. They are necessarily limited in their involvement because of the conditions in which they work and that's why they can't be a helpful resource. There are a lot of progressive people and a lot of progressive thinkers that still hold that view because it does not seem wrong and it makes sense.

Interestingly, the decision to make a home visit to families was not something mandated by Teach For America or suggested by the charter school in which he worked but rather a decision Denis made to gather data for a new literacy initiative he planned to launch in his free time. These visits allowed Denis to move beyond the more limiting narratives of parent involvement and to transcend discourses that frame parents as incapable or uncaring. Instead, by conducting home visits, Denis was able to gauge how much parents were already doing in the service of their children:

> It's kind of intuitive, so it was helpful to go on home visits and ask the parents those two questions. It was really moving to see how they spoke about it. There weren't a ton of parents that really had to think, "Hmmm. What are my dreams for my kids?" They had a pretty concrete and strong vision and they still really passionately do that and a lot of them are like, "I want my kid to be doing better than I'm doing now. I want my kid to do this, that and the other." It's something that they have put a lot of thought and energy into already. The next question was, "How do you see yourself helping your child?" So many parents volunteered things that they are already doing. I asked that question hoping to start the brainstorm with them things they could do to help, but what I got was them telling me what they were already doing. A lot of them were putting a lot of time and energy into it whether it was directly or a grandparent, a lot of kids reading at home. They would say, "At the supermarket, I pick up these books and read with my kid at night."

Unfortunately, the conception of urban students being exceptionally "low" or "behind" is so entrenched in public consciousness that there seems to be little space in which teachers, like Denis, might discover other possibilities. In an analogous example from the aid industry, Anderson (1998) mentions that the humanitarian community has come to rely on "needs assessments" rather than "capacities assessments" before beginning work in a particular community: "A capacities assessment communicates respect for people's competence, their skills in life management, and their minds and spirits" (p. 142). She suggests that applying a capacities rather than needs-based framework might prove effective in re-framing how "victims" are viewed and the ways in which work in impoverished communities is approached, conducted and

disseminated.

Infinite Jurisdiction

Generally speaking, corps members and aid workers enter their respective fields with a desire to improve people's life chances. The corps members I worked with had obvious concerns regarding the future prospects of their students; both Teach For America and Excel place a premium on college attendance as a significant indicator of success, a notion which is emphasized beginning in Pre-K. The term "infinite jurisdiction," employed by Tanya, a 2nd grade Excel teacher, when I was observing in her classroom is a useful metaphor for theorizing the ways in which some corps members understand their mission to promote the academic achievement of their students. According to Tanya, "infinite jurisdiction is a term used by the Excel Charter Network to signify that the teacher's control must extend beyond the confines of the classroom. Tanya, for example, was expected to maintain control over the hallways outside her classroom even if it meant disciplining children whom she did not know. The overt use of this language invites an exploration into how far the jurisdiction of the school should extend in the service of promoting student achievement and whether students' homes and futures are subject to school policies. Rony Brauman, former President of Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), notes, "What the people we help do in the future is not our business unless we feel we want to go back to colonial times where we order their lives. If we are dealing with equals they should be able to write their own history and their own future" (Dawes, 2007, p. 208). This notion can be a difficult one to fully embrace when one of the explicit purposes of both aid work and urban education entails improving the life chances of certain constituencies. Yet, Brauman's invocation of colonialism underscores the web of complexity surrounding college rhetoric. Again, like aid workers, corps members must wrestle with issues of control and must reconcile their hopes for their students' future with other, contradictory narratives.

Concerns about students' futures manifested themselves in a number of different ways and began to surface even at the early elementary grades. Though she could have selected any topic, Esther designed a unit on college for her first grade students which featured, as a capstone project, the writing of a predictive autobiography in which students were to explicitly map out a path to college. Other elements of the unit included a tour of a college campus and the perusal of college materials in order to identify potential majors. After completing the unit, Esther reflected on whether or not it was a developmentally-appropriate activity to engage in with her students:

> In reflection, I also consider to what extent it is appropriate to push a college-bound agenda as early in a child's educational career as I did, and I wonder whether or not I will change my mind in this regard over the course of the upcoming years.

Esther was not unique in her desire to introduce ideas about college attendance to her young students. Corps members viewed these discourses about the future as a source of motivation for their students; many believed, for example, that if the connection between literacy achievement and college attendance were made explicit, students would show increased motivation:

> Overall, my interviews showed me that my students are generally passionate about reading. They are able to make vague connections between reading, school, increasing knowledge, and future prospects. My goal is to make these connections more concrete to increase their drive.

Frustrated with their inability to directly influence the home lives and experiences of their

students, some corps members were determined to focus increased energy on the classroom. For example, in conducting interviews regarding his students' home literacy practices, Jason worried that his first-grade students were not actually reading at home but merely "flipping through books." Wrestling with his prospective reach as an educator, Jason began to feel that meaningful learning could only occur in the classroom where he managed to maintain a great deal of control:

> These questions also made me realize that I need to work within my own locus of control. I cannot control what goes on at each of my student's homes. The only thing that I can control is what we do in the classroom. With this in mind it is my job to take the information I learned from these questions and use it in a way to help foster each student's growth as a reader.

In a similar questioning of home literacy practices and commensurate effort to increase what is possible in the classroom setting, Melissa stated the following:

> Based on what I have learned from my students, I can gather that the home environment is not the best for reading. In my reading group, therefore, I need to foster the type of environment that they do not encounter at home; it needs to be calm, quiet and focused on allowing students to sound out the words and write the words on their own.

Moreover, a Kindergarten teacher named Deneah expressed concerns about how the attitudes of her students' parents and the kinds of activities conducted in the home sphere would affect the future achievement of her students. In a vignette composed for class, she related an anecdote about a parent who refused to fill out a reading log over the weekend because she preferred to do other activities with her children during this time. Deneah wrote:

> I began the conversation by restating her note and how reading was essential for her child's educational growth. I began to recite everything that I believed and everything that had been drilled into my head about my student's future. I spoke with such confidence and I was certain that her mother would believe what I was selling.

Deneah left the conversation with this parent feeling misunderstood and frustrated by the contrasting expectations and educational philosophies. Convinced of her mission through Teach for America to close the achievement gap and work toward equity, she cannot see value in this mother's assertion that young children should participate in a range of different activities on the weekends. In another assignment, Deneah continued her contemplation of whether or not she and her students' families have the same agenda with regards to achievement: "As Rachel sat describing books she read and her reading practices, I could not help but wonder if her mother realized how crucial reading is to her child's success." Just as students were broadly depicted as under-achieving, families were often described as unable or unwilling to help children achieve significant academic goals.

While teachers like Deneah espoused personal convictions regarding their students' future achievement, for many teachers, the ongoing reinforcement of college rhetoric was mandated by their schools. Excel teachers, for example, were evaluated on how effectively they incorporated "success speak" into their lessons. In this discussion, Barbara and Daphne, two early childhood teachers, problematized Excel's overwhelming emphasis on college:

> *Daphne*: I got developing on my last formal [evaluation] because I didn't have

enough success speak in my lesson. I was told to reference the blue book in my formal debrief to get examples and one of them was something about college. It was applicable to high-schoolers. Those are the examples in the blue book. "You guys are doing such a good job and some kind of reference to…

Barbara: "We're going to get to college. If you get this lesson today, it will help you get to college."

Daphne: I get in trouble because that stuff doesn't come out of my mouth ever.

Barbara: If you don't do this worksheet, you're not getting into college.

Like Esther, then, these two teachers pondered the appropriateness of motivating kindergarten and first grade students through a discourse focused on the distant and remote notion of college attendance. However, due to Excel's intense focus on higher education, teachers have little choice but to conform to this way of speaking, lest they risk repeated poor evaluations or possibly even termination. Indeed, the Excel teacher handbook outlines specific guidelines regarding what they refer to not as "success speak" as the teachers call it but "SpeakSuccess:"

> If you say anything frequently enough, people start to believe it! This is the idea behind Speak Success. Specifically, if a teacher tells students that they will achieve, ultimately students start to believe it and their actions follow suit. It's the positive spin of a self-fulfilling prophesy (Excel Instructional Guide, 2010).

This is not to suggest that holding high expectations for students is not essential or that students shouldn't be encouraged to set and attain worthwhile goals. Many corps members, however, were concerned that the extensive emphasis on college began to function as a mechanism for control which could actually impede student achievement:

> I grapple with this all the time or I look at my students and I forget they are elementary school kids, because they are treated like little adults at our school and I don't think that's the best way. I think that's kind of where it's holding them down where they're not having that time to try different areas, because not everyone excels at academics. There could be a student that we're holding back from being a musical genius…. I just feel like they're set in that trap where you have to go to college. Do well at this school so you can go to a good high school and go to college. So we are kind of holding back other areas that they may excel at.

Not only are college attendance and future success wielded as controlling mechanisms, but there is evidence that while students internalize the rhetoric to some degree, for many of them it is divorced from authentic learning and otherwise devoid of meaning. In describing a conversation with his third grade students, Nicolas noted the following:

> Also central to Excel's ideology is college rhetoric. Starting in kindergarten the purpose of school is defined as college attendance; each classroom is named after a college and grade levels are often defined as their graduating college class. (Third grade is the Class of 2024, for instance). I was interested in how the combination of stressing reading and college acceptance impacted how students perceived the purpose of reading. Interestingly, all three students directly tied reading to college and later success. Laniya and Nigel both said that reading was important because "you need to know a lot of words to go to college." Xavier's response demonstrated a brutal honesty and cynicism: "So you can go to college

and get a good job. Other than that, it's corny."

Here Nicolas illustrates that while the rhetoric has indeed pervaded the consciousness of his students, reading retains little meaning for them in and of itself. Students' parents, siblings and other family members likely use literacy for a range of daily purposes like reading for pleasure, storytelling, completing household tasks, communicating with extended family and friends in other locations, etc. (Heath, 1983). However, when these literacy practices are ignored by schools and the broader purpose of literacy is narrowed to college attendance, educators miss an opportunity to make important home/school connections and to build upon children's cultural knowledge and capacities (Campano, 2008; Moll et al., 2005).

Undergirding the discourse of future achievement and college attendance is the notion that leaving the neighborhood behind is one of the implicit byproducts of academic success. As Popkewitz (1998) notes, "Historically, the focus on urban and rural schools is part of a larger trajectory of school reform capturing a 19th century view of schooling as a means to rescue children from their economic, social and cultural conditions through planned intervention" (p. 21). Numerous corps members struggled with the assumption that future success implies abandoning home communities. As Moll & Gonzalez (1997) note home communities are often viewed "as places from which children must be saved or rescued, rather than places that, in addition to problems (as in all communities), contain valuable knowledge and experiences…" (p. 98). In lamenting the messages communicated by her school regarding college attendance and the role she plays in "saving" students from their current circumstances, one corps member stated the following:

> I have a really big problem with our school because it's set up so that the curriculum holds all of the knowledge and we are people who are transmitting it to our students and our students are taught, "You sit still and silent, you have your eyes on the teacher and you better not move, because if you don't, you're not going to get that information, you're not going to go to college and you're not going to get out of this neighborhood." That's the message that is put through our school. It's like, "This school is coming here and they are going to save you. This school has the information and we know the one straight path to college.

Like Nicolas, this corps member struggled with the notion that hopes for future achievement remained divorced from deeper meaning and a commitment to actual learning and were based instead on notions of obedience and conformity:

> College isn't about learning and college isn't about gaining knowledge and becoming a leader. It's about being obedient and getting credentials so you can get a job and get money and get out of [neighborhood]. That for me is hands down the biggest struggle that I have everyday. Personally, everyday I'm like, "What the hell am I doing?" I am telling kids, "The only way you will be successful is if you listen to me and you better not dare interrupt me because I will call your mother and tell her that you were bad in school. Then you're not going to go to college." Why is my kindergartener telling me, "I am sitting like a star right now so my brain will grow and I can graduate college." That's really upsetting for me. They don't even know what college is, but it's this arbitrary thing that they are going to get. None of it's about learning.

Some corps members chose to respond to these troubling messages by designing units for the course that would emphasize the positive aspects of the students' communities in an effort to emphasize the problematic aspects of encouraging an "escape-mentality." Moreover, these units aimed to draw upon community resources in order to encourage deeper learning. Daphne was particularly inspired by what she considered a troubling emphasis on college as a means of escape and wrote the following in the rationale for her unit, which emphasized the broad range of assets presented in the community:

> Since the beginning of the year, our school has had a 'going to college' theme which has given our students a concrete reason to be successful in grades kindergarten through twelve. While this is a wonderful reason, I feel that the overarching college theme simultaneously passes on the message that escaping from their local, urban communities is their ultimate goal. Most of our students have lived in their community all of their lives with their families and their extended families nearby. The neighborhood is where they have had most new experiences and shaped their perspectives. It is a place rich as any other community with culture and should not be a place from which our students should "escape" if given the chance.

Designing a community-based unit helped Daphne both to problematize her school's focus on college attendance and to ground the curriculum in her students' lived experiences. While she undoubtedly has high expectations for student achievement, she recognizes that high achievement should not occur at the expense of community connectedness.

Remaining in/Leaving the Urban Classroom

Helping professions like social work and teaching have always been characterized by high rates of attrition and burn out. Questions of leaving, however, are considered differently within Teach For America primarily because corps members are asked only to commit to two years in the urban classroom and it is now widely assumed that the majority will move on after those two years to pursue other careers. While some studies have found that up to 60 % of TFA corps members continue beyond their two-year commitment, by the fourth year, only an estimated 14% remain in their original placement (Donaldson & Moore-Johnson, 2011). Moreover, their long-term intentions prior to entering TFA have an impact on whether or not they remain teaching. Those who intend to make teaching a career or who majored in education as undergraduates are significantly more likely to remain in the classroom. Some corps members who entered the classroom with the intention of pursuing a career in education still found themselves unable to complete their tenure and made the difficult decision to leave in the middle of the year (Donaldson & Moore-Johnson, 2011).

According to Dawes (2007), international aid workers, like corps members, must accept that, "their personal sacrifices will never make the difference they desired and they always learn this, early on- the despair can be as correspondingly profound as the hope, and can make continuing the work impossible" (p. 148). Indeed, several of the corps members involved in this study decided to leave the program early. Many others admitted to writing resignation letters but ultimately chose to stay- at least until the end of the year. One corps member, Eleanor, who did decide to leave mid-year, went through a long and drawn-out decision-making process. Her account demonstrates that the decision to quit is often accompanied by intense feelings of guilt:

> I first interacted with my program director. He came to the school and I told him I

had made a decision to leave and he basically told me it was the worst decision I could ever make. I needed to think about it more. He didn't accept the fact that I had already talked to people who really knew me. He was very offended and told me so. He took it personally that I had not involved him in this decision. I was like, "It's a personal decision. You're not involved in my personal life and I don't need to talk to you about personal things."

Unlike some of the other corps members who chose to leave, Eleanor's decision was not the result of frustrations with her students, school or administration. Rather, she came to resent her program director's admonitions that no one else would want to teach her students. She assumed that he aimed to make her feel "bad" or guilty:

I was really disappointed in his distrust and disregard for my school. Nobody else wants to teach kids in west [Ridgeville]. He said that. He said, "It's not like there are people lined up to teach kids in west [Ridgeville]. They are just going to hire a long term sub. He took it personally because somebody else has already quit and they are down to two teachers in the first grade at the same school. It was rude and it made me more angry than feel bad. It just made me angry. I totally lost a lot of respect for that individual as well as for TFA as a whole. Then I talked to another lady and I don't exactly know what her role is, but she's involved in a lot of stuff. She basically told me that it's not okay to leave kids in the middle of the year. I don't even remember. I just sat quiet while I was on the phone with her and at the end I said, "Okay." Then she went on to tell me some other stuff. She said, "Did you want to respond to what I said earlier?" I was like, "Not really. I've heard it before. What do you want me to do, argue with you about it?" It just made me angry. I was like, "I'm not even going to waste my time on this."

Though Eleanor clearly had some mixed feelings regarding her decision, she was not persuaded to stay by TFA's efforts and followed through with her decision to leave the classroom in mid-October. Another corps member, Annika, also ended up quitting but waited until the end of the school year out of concern for the well-being of her students:

I didn't quit in the middle of the year. I am going to see my kids through the end of the year. There was a point where I felt like I was going to quit. I knew that I would feel worse for longer. I knew how bad I was feeling in November. I would feel worse so much longer if I left my kids at that point of the year. I knew that would have been so much worse. I definitely stayed the year because of my students. I don't know if I'm quitting because of TFA. I don't know. It has not been a good match.

Interestingly, Annika did not entirely give up on teaching, professing plans to teach again in the future but felt as though teaching through TFA was not the right fit for her. She seemed to justify a difficult decision through her assertion that staying through the end of the year made a difference to her students. Even those teachers who decided to remain in the classroom for the duration of their two year commitment entertained thoughts and fantasies of quitting. Micah, for example, like Annika, cited the desire to not abandon his students in the middle of the year as one of his primary reasons for staying, even though he did not feel particularly successful as an educator:

They [the students] might get on my nerves and I could be so annoyed with them,

but at the same time, like I can find a reason for all my students why I love them and why I want to go back there every day. They have too many changes. I have thought many times in the year to quit. I think everybody has, at that school especially, but they are just going through so many changes that it is not going to be helpful to have another change in their life. Just being there I figure is consistency. Even if I am not teaching well or they are not learning a lot, at least consistency will help.

One recurring narrative involves the notion that students need consistency above all else and that an unskilled teacher who cares deeply about students is most likely superior to a long-term sub which is how most teachers conceive of the alternative. Alex, however, expressed doubts about whether the consistency corps members provided was really superior to the possible alternative:

> I think by October, people start quitting and it gets very rough because they get really overwhelmed. You are just not prepared. You are just given a really good pep talk and you're doing a really good thing so go in there and try your best. I think we're doing more harm than good.

Of the many corps members asked about their desire to leave the urban classroom, Alex was the only person to express the sentiment that his presence with his students was ultimately causing more harm than good. Debates around international aid and humanitarian intervention reflect Alex's concerns regarding whether more harm than good is being accomplished. In her book, *The Crisis Caravan*, for example, Linda Polman (2011) documents the ways in which humanitarian assistance has fueled international conflict. According to Polman, Westerners with limited understanding of places like Sierra Leone and Rwanda have prolonged human suffering through the misappropriation of aid. Similarly, authors like Darling-Hammond (1994) and Popkewitz (1998) worry that the framework of "normativity" which many corps members unknowingly apply to the urban and rural settings in which they work can severely compromise their ability to "help." In spite of such critiques, most corps members favor the narrative that the consistency they provide by remaining in a situation that is daunting and challenging offers the possibility for transformation. It is this narrative that allows teachers to continue working despite the perceived complications and hopelessness of a particular situation.

Conclusion

The application of a humanitarian lens to urban school reform is useful in illuminating the kinds of tensions that emerge when young teachers attempt to fulfill their mission of remedying educational inequities. Their desire, for example, to impact positively the life chances of students can lead to an atmosphere characterized by excessive control which limits rather than broadens student potential

The humanitarian aid industry is rife with examples of how top-down, cavalier endeavors have worsened the situation of various constituencies (Easterly, 2006; Polman, 2011). Similarly, the Teach For America model, characterized by short tenures in urban communities, rudimentary training and the omission of robust cross-cultural preparation, is strikingly similar to the kinds of international development that tend to be least effective in the long-term. As with humanitarian aid, one of the challenges of urban education is to effectively address the gravity of the problems without reifying problematic images of urban schools, students and families. This struggle proved to be particularly salient for corps members who struggled to dismiss deficit frameworks when

discussing or writing about students, families and communities. Even when course assignments or discussion topics were left purposefully vague, issues of equity were raised again and again as corps members attempted to reconcile their expectations for urban teaching with the realities of their situations.

Although I aimed to offer a space of shared inquiry in which corps members could collaboratively problematize issues related to equity, diversity and achievement, some TFA teachers still found their work in urban classrooms untenable and, as a result, made the difficult decision to leave. Regardless of their decision, corps members continued to wrestle with their experiences and construct narratives about urban education as a means of sense-making. In understanding and assessing school reform initiatives like Teach For America whose primary aim is to eliminate the achievement gap, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of the teachers who are expected to carry out the work on a daily basis with few sanctioned spaces in which to theorize their own emerging ideas regarding urban schooling.

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